

**MEETING SUMMARY #7
WSF COMMUNITY MEETING
POPE MARINE BUILDING, PORT TOWNSEND, WA
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2009 5:15 – 6:30 P.M.**

Note: This meeting summary represents notes from the Washington State Department of Transportation Ferries Division (WSF) Community Meeting, and is not a formal transcript or minutes. It is provided as a record for the staff and public in attendance, and other interested parties.

Welcome and Introductions

WSF Communications Director Marta Coursey

Marta welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming. She apologized for David being late due to weather issues, then briefly went over the agenda and noted that there would be time for public comment at the end of the meeting.

Vehicle Reservations Pre-Design Study

WSDOT Assistant Secretary David H. Moseley

David arrived and went right into discussing vehicle reservations. The Legislature has directed us to conduct a pre-design study of what a reservations system would look like. What would the IT / back office technology have to be to serve the needs of our customers? What business rules would need to be in place to make the system work well and be flexible? I want to be clear - the Legislature has not authorized us to implement reservations anywhere. They want to see the pre-design report to understand how reservations would work, and to make sure that it would be helpful to customers rather than an inconvenience. This is only worth doing if it can help our customers as well as help us spread our demand better.

David continued the discussion by explaining some of the reasons for reservations. Port Townsend / Keystone riders are very aware of the steel electrics being pulled from service. That event combined with the fact that our entire fleet is aging has led to all of the funding being directed toward building new boats. There is no funding for terminal expansion. There are congestion issues at our terminals, and because of the financial situation that the state is in we have had to identify some strategies that will allow us to better use the space that we have without expanding any of our facilities. A reservation system may be one way to mitigate some of the demand, reduce wait times, and cut down on the amount of vehicles idling at the tollbooths. It was identified in our Long Range Plan and the Legislature directed us to take a closer look at this

possibility. If we were able to take the line at the tollbooth and turn it into a list of reserved cars, we could try to push the demand out to underutilized trips. If we are able to provide our customers with certainty about the boat they will be able to get on, so they can just come down and get on the boat, we may be able to attract more users by offering that service. By doing this we are trying to avoid having to expand our existing terminals.

The Legislature wants to know how this would work, what terminal processing enhancements we would need, the costs/benefits/risks, and the IT back office needs. As we go through the pre-design study, our first goal is to not limit our users' abilities to travel. Also, the system has to be easy to use and flexible. We want to improve our ferry communities' environments and mitigate expensive terminal construction. We sent out a Request for Information to the industry to determine what types of reservation programs are available off the shelf. We received six responses that were very useful, and helped us to see some features that our customers might like. We also contacted more than a dozen ferry systems around the world that use reservations, including some in England and Istanbul, Turkey. There are many similarities between our system and these other systems, but also many differences. We have benefited from learning about what has worked and not worked for these other systems.

We have also split up into work groups to pursue a variety of topics, one of which is the business rules that would need to be in place to accomplish our goals. We need these rules to be able to spread our demand better, but also to protect all of our different types of users. We needed to apply this study to a specific route, and we chose Edmonds / Kingston, which has turned out to be a great choice. It is a challenging route, which has all the different user types and also carries the most cars in our entire system. We formed a partnership group in July made up of a variety of users from both sides of that route, and we have been meeting to discuss the proposed system very much like we did here. They have been very constructive, asking lots of great questions, and we appreciate the time they have put in.

Next we are expected to present the draft pre-design report to the Legislature on December 15th. We have one more partnership meeting before then and lots of work to do. It is a huge task to bring together all of what we have learned. We envision that after the document is finalized, every route will be slightly different, and the pre-design report won't cover every characteristic of every route. We don't know what the future holds, we don't know if this will be implemented on some routes and not others; it may not be a one size fits all system.

Clarifying Questions from Audience



1. The Legislature will probably approve this if they think it doesn't cost anything. Does this come with a projected cost?
Yes, there is a cost/benefit analysis section.
2. Can we tweak what we have now? The existing telephone system is limited and very frustrating. You try to call and change or cancel a reservation and end up on hold for too long. The attitude at the terminal is nonchalant about it. They tell us not to worry about it. Until this study becomes reality, what are the band-aids for our existing system that would help us now?
Are your problems mostly on the communication side, like access to the system?
Yes.
We understand that it needs to be improved upon.
People are making lots of reservations under multiple email addresses and that causes a mess.
Yes, as it is there is no cost to make or break a reservation. We are working on those items; we have a callback system that asks you to leave your number if the hold time is long and someone will get back to you.
Nobody likes that.
We need some short term improvements to the website and the phone system; is that what you're asking for?
Yes. The website is better now that the refresh page waits until all of your information is in now.
We will take that back and look at it. We now have the ability to take a deposit of up to 100% of the fare. This has been an issue since the beginning; there is no economic loss for making a reservation and not using it. If you can't change or cancel a reservation right now though, it is probably more important to fix that first.
3. If the Legislature doesn't agree to implement reservations system wide, will the reservations here go away when we get the new boats, or are they here to stay?
We hope that they will stay. We have about 3 million dollars allocated for this already in the 09/11 biennium and we're hoping they will allow us to use that to make our existing system better.
4. You had the wrong time for this meeting posted on your website.
I apologize; we had to move the meeting up.
5. What exactly was broken that we are fixing with reservations?
On this route it came as a request from the community when we lost the steel electrics. We needed reservations, particularly for the summer of 2008, because the space on the boat has been so limited. Once we had it in place and saw general satisfaction with it we've continued.
6. We won't be back to having two boats until well into 2011, correct?

It will be late spring of 2011.

Are you optimistic of that happening?

I'm more than optimistic, I'm expectant.

We need reservations to keep the queues out of our town until we get those boats; if the Legislature approves this how long until its deployed?

If they accept the idea of improving the existing systems, I would think maybe as early as the summer of 2010 – don't hold me to that.

The core functions may be in place by next summer?

Yes.

That's great.

We have learned that there are some robust, off-the-shelf systems out there; we wouldn't be building this from scratch.

7. Will there be more staff initially, to help answer the phone? Will there be a budget for that?

We would be looking at an entirely new and better phone system.

8. I have lost all faith in the phone system. You will have to re-launch it completely. Many of us don't even bother with the phone system; we don't even try any more.

So you are only using the online service.

Yes.

9. Tourists calling from their cell phones need to be able to use that system without waiting for so long or getting cut off.

Ok, that's good feedback. Thank you.

10. So many sailing cancellations are out of your control due to weather. But if you know there will be high winds why don't you put a warning on your website? The reservation system needs to be able to alert people by phone or email that there will be cancellations.

We have learned from our research of other ferry reservation systems that quick, accessible real-time information is essential. We know it can't just be put online; we have to use all the available technologies that are out there.

New Vessel Program

WSDOT Assistant Secretary David H. Moseley

David discussed the construction of the new ferry at Todd Shipyard. We are currently undergoing construction of the first 64-car ferry. The project is on time and on budget; it is looking like a boat at this point rather than a bunch of pieces of steel. We have monthly meetings with Todd Shipyard which are very informative. It will be completed by the end of June next year, and then there will be testing and sea trials for 4-6 weeks. We expect the new vessel to be in service on this run, Port Townsend / Keystone, in August of 2010. This is our

first new boat in 10-12 years and we are very pleased. We recently had a bid opening for 2 more 64-car ferries with an option for a third. The bid came in much better than the first bid, so even though there was only one bidder again, there was still a significant savings. We issued the Notice to Proceed last week, from which point Todd has 540 days to complete the 2nd boat. They may beat that milestone by a couple of weeks because the engineering work is the same. Then the 3rd boat is due to be complete in January of 2012; that boat will replace the Rhody on the Point Defiance / Tahlequah route. Our next step is to start building 144-car boats. We would like to go right into building the larger boats rather than a fourth 64-car boat.

Clarifying Questions from Audience

1. So we will get the boat in late summer?

Mid-August.

So the end of summer.

We will take possession of the vessel at the end of June, do the testing and sea-trials for 4-6 weeks, and then it will be put into service on this route.

2. Is there any concern that the 3rd boat that could run on this route may be delayed and we would build a 144-car boat instead?

No, we will build at least three 64-car boats. My concern is that the 4th boat will be a 64-car rather than a 144-car. The smaller boats are cheaper and we do want boats built, but we have a need for larger boats as well.

3. Our mayor came back from her visit at the shipyard very impressed with what she saw of the progress and the teamwork. Your approach is working.

Yes, prior to this project we heard loud and clear from the Legislature and Todd shipyard that they had concerns about WSF being able to manage the construction. We worked hard with Todd before construction began to create a good working relationship that works for all parties. It has worked; it is a genuine, positive relationship. Todd is very conservative; if they didn't feel that things were going well they would be making noise. We all agree that the best way to get those 144-car boats built is to show that we can do the 64-car boats well.

4. How long is this boat leased?

Through August of 2010, with two possible extensions. I feel very comfortable that we won't have to do that, which is good because we have absolutely zero leverage to negotiate for that boat. Also, Anderson Island wants their boat back.

5. In terms of aesthetics, will the woodwork from the steel electrics be used in the new boats?

No, but the artwork is available if it will fit.

6. I don't know if the passenger cabin arrangement is something that can still be discussed. This is a tourist run, and the seating arrangement looks like it is more geared for commuters, with people seated to look at the back of each others' heads. Tourists want to be able to look at each other and there is no capacity to do that in this design. Maybe we could have a flexible seating arrangement where some seats could be moved, or an open space that can be used for meetings. Another thing the steel electrics had was a front end lookout window with open space in front of it, but in this design the seats go right up to the window. It would be better to have room to sit and/or stand by the window and look outside. These are not major revisions, but they would make the boat more user-friendly for the tourists.

I hear you; I don't know what can be done. Certainly nothing for this first boat but we may be able to look at that for number 2 or number 3. We will look into it, but I don't want to raise your hopes.

Thank you, I feel that I have been heard.

Preparing for the 2010 Legislative Session

WSDOT Assistant Secretary David H. Moseley

David discussed the upcoming 2010 Legislative session. As you know WSF was front and center during the 2009 Legislative session, with Plan B in the spotlight. We don't anticipate that same attention in the 2010 session. There are some important things they have asked to see; the reservations pre-design study is one of those. Also they want to see a new accident and incident investigation policy, fuel conservation targets, and information regarding a fuel surcharge in case gas prices spike again. Those are some issues that will be discussed; these are reports on things that the Legislature has asked us to look at, but they are not hot-button issues like the Long-Range Plan last year and the vessel and terminal issues. The JTC (Joint Transportation Committee) is doing a study on alternative funding options for transportation, because the gas tax is dropping as cars become more fuel efficient. In 2016 there is a one billion dollar gap in funding for the ferry system, and we need to fill that gap. That discussion will be occurring more in the 2011 session, but we need to be ready and at the table for those discussions. If there is a comprehensive transportation package for the Legislature to consider we need to be a part of it.

Clarifying Questions from Audience

1. Do you know if there is any discussion of congestion pricing? I know the DOT participated in a study but they weren't very enthused about it; have you heard anything on that?

Well, they have the 167 Hot Lanes, which is a type of congestion pricing.

What about the Vehicle Mileage Tax? If they do that they might as well do congestion pricing at the same time.

I believe the Legislature has turned away from the VMT a little; tolling is more a part of the conversation.

Public Comments & Questions

1. I am working with Google in an attempt to show the tradeoff of cost and time between the bus and ferry rather than driving. Some data is being held back by Google; you need to provide it to them in a way it can be presented. If people can see the accurate cost it may encourage them to walk on. I've attempted to work with your staff on this and I'm not getting anywhere. I'm asking that you consider what happens when your data is missing from the calculation. Even if you only do it for Mukilteo / Clinton for awhile and see if it works.

OK, we will converse about that.

2. With the new ferries coming, is your goal to attract more walk-on riders?
Yes.

I would suggest working to get a bus to meet people on the other side. They get off on the Whidbey side and have no way to get anywhere if they didn't drive. If you could get some bus service going that would help.

Island County doesn't have a bus run there?

They do but it's inadequate and infrequent. It doesn't match the ferry schedule; it's not dependable. There is a funding issue with Island Transit as well, but you need to be in a partnership with them on the schedule.

Some transit agencies are more receptive than others, but point made.

3. Can you explain a little about the upcoming scheduled cancellations?
Yes, the Steilacoom II needs its annual inspection. We have a window between mid December and mid February; a 60 day period during which those inspections need to be completed. It takes from 1-3 days to go through the list of Coast Guard required tests. Our Eagle Harbor people do this all the time and are very proficient. We looked at the time frame and chose the best period, which is the 2nd weekend in January in between New Year's and Martin Luther King Jr. day. It is literally the slowest ridership weekend of the entire year.

If the traffic is lighter midweek, could you do a three-day window midweek?

We could, but that would interfere with the daily commuters and the commercial interests. It would actually be better for us cost wise because we wouldn't be paying overtime for our crews to work the weekend, but our feeling was that because of the commuters the weekend would be better. Tuesday and Wednesday are really the lightest days of the week, but this particular weekend is the deadest of the whole year. We also

have the potential to be done with the inspections in one day; the worst case scenario would be three days. We did have a conversation about bringing in passenger-only service for that weekend, but it would be very expensive to do so. Our conclusion was that the best decision was to choose a very slow weekend and not provide service for those few days. If they find something wrong with the boat will it take longer? No, we would schedule service out for a later date. If it needed immediate service we would then provide passenger-only service.

I think that is very sound judgment.

4. Why can't you schedule the inspections during high winds like this when the service is cancelled anyway?

That is worth thinking about; if it's down anyway, why not? We do have to work with the Coast Guard's schedule as well though.

5. I appreciate the time that you have given us so that we have a chance to plan ahead.

It will also be printed into the winter schedule.

6. Does the 530 AM radio station work?

Yes, we listen all the time.

It seems very crackly every time I try to listen.

7. Whenever there's a message broadcast by that frequency, it would be great if the sign listed a phone number to call as well. I can't always get that channel.

The number is 511, for what it's worth. I have heard that it's not that helpful.

8. Is WSF doing anything with Facebook?

No.

There is an opportunity there to communicate with a very large section of the public that could be notified of news, and it's free.

I have heard of that, and Twitter as well.

It takes ten minutes to set up a page, and then you have access to thousands of people.

There are many new ways to communicate and we need to make use of all of them.

Conclusion

David thanked everyone for coming. Meeting was adjourned.

Written Comments (Transcribed)

- (Mary Alice Sterling) Mary Alice Sterling of the Coupeville Historical Waterfront Association group (Main Street Organization) asked us to express her frustration about WSF having this meeting on a day when tide

cancellations made it rather iffy as to whether people from Whidbey could make it back home after the meeting, during a time of year when boats are often cancelled due to weather (which did happen today). She feels it's important for Coupeville area people to be able to attend the PT meeting in order to hear what's being said by PT residents about the Keystone route.